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THE GOOD DEVILS

AN ESSAY ON NATURE OPTIMISM

BY JOHN BURROUGHS

I

THIS is not the kind of essay on optimism that the editor of this magazine asked me to write—the optimism of a moralist—but the optimism of the naturalist.

As a whole and in the long run nature is good. The universe has not miscarried. The celestial laws, as Whitman says, do not need to be worked over and rectified. It is good to be here, and it must be equally good to go hence. With all the terrible things in nature, and all the cruel and wicked things in history, such as the present war, the world is good; life is good, and the Devil himself plays a good part.

When Emerson in his *Journal* says: "It is very odd that Nature should be so unscrupulous. She is no saint," one wonders just what he means. Does he expect gravity, or fire, or flood, or wind, or tide to have scruples? Should the cat have scruples about dining off the mouse or bird, or the wolf about making a meal of the lamb? or the plants and trees have scruples about running their roots into one another's preserves, or cutting off another's rain or sunshine? If our cowbird had the human conscience, we should expect her to have scruples about laying her eggs in the nest of another bird and thus shirking the labors and cares of parenthood, and we should expect the jays and crows to have scruples about eating up the eggs and young of their feathered neighbors, if they, too, were endowed with conscience. But none of them are troubled in this way, for the simple reason that they are not human beings. They live below the plane of man's moral conscience. Chemistry and the elementary forces have no scruples. Powder or dynamite will blow up its maker as soon as it will any one else. The rain does not scruple to spoil the farmer's hay, or the floods to wash away his house and destroy its inmates.

We are children when we marvel at the unscrupulousness of nature. Emerson often appealed to the nature of things. It is in the nature of things that they should be what we name unscrupulous; certainly Nature "is no saint," and it is well for us that she is not. If we identify Nature with what we call God, as we often do, then I am saying that it is well for us that the Eternal is "no saint." I suspect that if the drama of life and evolution which has been enacted upon the globe, and is still being enacted, had been modeled upon the principle of sainthood, you and I would not now be here. More's the pity, you may say, but there is no pity in nature.

II

Is nature then of the devil? If we choose to name it so—if we choose to revert to the conception of an earlier age—yes, Nature as we see her from our limited human point of view, is more or less of the devil—half-god and half-demon, we may say; divine in some of her manifestations and diabolical in others, divine when she favors us and diabolical when she is against us. But what we do not so

readily see is that in the long run the devil is on our side also; that he is the divine wearing a mask. The devil is the absence of something, he is a negative quantity that stimulates the positive and sets and keeps the currents going. Our breathing is the result of a perpetual tendency to a vacuum in our lungs; the growth of our bodies is the result of a co-operation and agreement between the integrating and disintegrating forces.

We control the devil and make him our friend when we control most of the forces of nature—the fire, the wind, the waters, electricity, magnetism, gravity, chemical affinity and so on. If our hold upon them slips, they destroy us. If we are not watchful in our laboratories, the same chemistry that builds up our bodies will blow our bodies to atoms. The tornado, the earthquake, the volcano, the thunderbolt, have all helped to make the earth what we behold it. The floods have helped, the avalanches have helped, frost and wind and snow, tropic heat and arctic cold have helped. These devils are the hod-carriers that serve the divine mason—the mixers and builders, the plowers and the planters, the levellers and the engineer. Hence, I say: "Good Devil, be thou my friend; you give me power, you sharpen my wits, you make a man of me."

This is the tangible, physical devil; the intangible, moral devil is not so easily dealt with. It is not so easy to turn the spirit of crime, intemperance, cruelty, war, superstition, greed and so on to our advantage. Yet there also is power going to waste, or misdirected. There is a light under the feet of these things also. Trade, out of which has come greed, has opened up and humanized the world; war has often grafted a superior stock upon an inferior.

"It was for Beauty that the world was made." Emerson quotes this verse from Ben Jonson and says that it is better than any single line of Tennyson's "In Memoriam." Only the poet is allowed to make such extravagant statements. We cannot in soberness and truth say that the world was made for any particular end. It is out of a certain harmony of the elements that we arose and our sense of beauty was developed, but the world exists for as many ends as we have power to conceive of. Order, harmony, rhythm, compensation, equilibrium, circles, spheres, are fundamental in nature. Music, which is beauty to the ear, hath power over inert matter. In the Mammoth Cave the very rocks will sing if you speak to them in the right key. How steel filings on a metal surface will dance and arrange themselves in symmetrical groups under the influence of musical chords! Harmony is at the heart of nature, but, in the music of creation, disharmony plays a part also. The world is not all beautiful unless seen as a whole—all its discords are harmonized in the curve of the sphere.

Emerson's own line "Beauty is its own excuse for being" is better and truer than the one he quotes from Ben Jonson.

When saying that in the music of creation disharmony plays a part also, I do not mean to imply that

this is not also true in human music. The dissonances are just as much a part of great music as are the harmonies—what would the operas of Wagner be without the tremendous dissonances? That is what makes Wagner one of the greatest in music; he sees things whole, just as Whitman does in his art—sees that “all are but parts of one stupendous whole,” and that the merely pretty in music, in poetry, in any art, as in nature, is only one little phase of it, only an arc of the great circle.

III

What trouble we get into when we identify God with nature, and what trouble we get into when we refuse to identify the two! In the first case we reach the unity that the mind craves, but it is a unity made up of those antagonisms which revolt us. In the second case it is a duality that leaves half of the world to the devil.

We select what we call the divine and stand confused and abashed before the residue. We must either change our notion about the power we call God and make it all-inclusive, embracing evil as well as good, or else we must change our notion about nature and see no evil in it. God and nature are one. If they are two, who or what is the second?

How can we fail to see that all the shaded part of the picture is necessary to the picture—that all high lights would not make a picture, but only a daub; and that all that we call good would not make a world in which men could live and develop? Life goes on under conditions more or less antagonistic—the antagonism gives the power—the friction develops electricity. The vices and crimes and follies and excesses of society are the riot and overflow of the virtues. The pride of the rich, the tyranny of power, the lust of gain, the riot of sensuality, are all a little too much of a good thing—a little too much heat, or light, or rain, or frost, or snow, or food, or drink. There can be no perversions till there is something good to pervert, no counterfeits till there is first the genuine article.

The currents of life get out of their banks and we have a plague of locusts, or moths, or forest worms, but the natural check surely comes. The military spirit of Germany, which springs from a laudable devotion to the state and to the good of all, got out of its banks and brought on this world war, but the flood will surely subside and will probably be so dyked that it can never get out again. It will find its outlet in the arts of peace.

IV

The so-called laws of nature were not designed and decreed as our human laws are. There is not a great law-giver. The laws of nature are a sequence of events and activities—this sequence or order has worked itself out through countless ages. Nothing in the universe was designed in the human sense; it was not first a thought in some one's mind, and then became an act or a contrivance. This concept does not express the mystery of creation—there is a constant becoming, there was no beginning, there can be no ending. There is perpetual change and revolution, perpetual transfer and promotion, but nothing that can be explained in terms of our human experience and achievement. The world and all it

holds was created as the flower is created in the spring, as the snow flake is created in the winter, as the cloud is created in the summer sky. Man was created as the chick is created in the egg. Man has had a long day of creation; he has been becoming man since the first dawn of life in the old paleozoic seas. His horse and his dog have been becoming what we behold them through the whole geologic ages. This view does not leave the Eternal out of the universe, it puts him in it so that he cannot be got out. It makes him immanent in it at all points, it makes nature transcend human reason and human speech. As long as we think of God as a kind of superman external to nature, we can deny him and cut him out, but when we identify ourselves and all things else with him, there is no escaping him. We ourselves are a phase or a fraction of him. When we select or screen out what we name the good, the fair, the divine, and call that God, what are we to do with the residue? Call it the devil? The devil, too, then is a part of the Eternal Good. I want no emasculated universe. I want the fibre and virility and pungency and power and heat and drive which all that we call bad gives it.

Our mission is to tame and elevate and direct the elements and forces without weakening them. Thence comes our power. A perfect world would not be one without sin or suffering or struggle or failure. There can be no perfect world. But there can be one more and more livable, more and more in harmony with those laws that promote our well-being. Approximations, approximations—that is our success, and never complete fulfilment! When we say that God is the All, we must have the courage of our convictions and not flinch at the consequences. He is all that we call bad, as well as all that we call good. What we call good is *our* good, and not absolute good. There is no absolute good any more than there is absolute heat, or cold, or height, or depth.

We work our way through the mazes and contradictions of things—contradictions from our point of view—as best we can, eliminating the bad and cleaving unto the good, but the total scheme of things, the reconciliations and compensations and final results, we can never grasp. We cannot abate our war upon evil, because we have our well-being on these terms, but the evil is indirectly the father of our good.

V

All our religious and ethical systems grow out of our egoism. We plant ourselves in the middle of the universe and say, it is all for us. We make our gods in our own image, we invent a heaven for the good and a hell for the wicked, and seek to keep down the brute within us by a system of rewards and punishments. We improve our minds and souls as we improve our fields; we make them more fair and fertile but we do not eliminate nature; with her own weapons we improve our relations to her—we promote *our* good, but we are still Nature's; the harvest we reap is still Nature's. Our improvements upon her are mere removal of obstructions from the rill that gushes perennially from her prolific earth. We improve her fruits, her flowers, her animals, that is, make them more serviceable to us, by means of the hold we have upon her methods. We add nothing, we utilize what she has placed within our reach. All

of which means that we are Nature's, and that our knowing it and thinking of it cannot make the slightest difference. Our fate is inevitable. There is no escape. Whose else could we be? We cannot get off the sphere; if we could, we should still be a part of the All. Our elaborate schemes to appropriate or propitiate the Eternal, to stand well with him, to gain heaven and avoid hell, are devices of cunning Nature to spur us on the road of development. (How easily one falls into the language of extreme anthropomorphism!) The beautiful myth of the Garden of Eden, and of the fall of man is full of meaning. Surely it was a good devil that put man in the way of knowing good from evil, and led to his expulsion from a state of innocent impotence.

Nature's dealings with man, and with the other forms of life is on the same plan as her dealings with the earth as a whole. This drainage system of the globe is by no means perfect; there are marshes and stagnant waters in every country, but how small comparatively the area they cover! The rains and snows give birth to pure springs in all lands which unite to form the creeks, which again unite to form the rivers, which flow into the lakes and seas, giving back to the great bodies of water what the sun and the winds took from them, and thus keeping the vital currents of the globe in ceaseless motion. The same may be said of the weather system of the globe—it is not perfect everywhere—too much rain here, too much sun there, too hot in some parts, too cold in others, but on the whole favoring life and development.

We think we could improve the weather. So we might for our special purposes at times—when it rains and we have hay down, or a crop to put in, or a picnic in view; but it is better on the whole that we adapt ourselves to the weather than that the weather be adapted to the special needs of each of us. The Lord would be pretty sure to get mixed up if he tried the latter plan.

A general and not a specific Providence is our salvation. Good and evil mixed make life, as cloud and sun in due proportions make the best climate.

VI

War is a scourge like fire, the whirlwind, the earthquake, when viewed in the light of a particular time and people, but good may come from it after the lapse of ages. It strengthens and consolidates and develops the heroic virtues. Yet what a legacy of suffering and death go with it! But to invoke war is like invoking the pestilence, the tornado, the earthquake. The guilt of the German military staff in bringing on this war is of the blackest dye. It may be a good to man, but is a terrible evil to men. We cannot afford to play Providence; we must not play with Jove's thunderbolts. War cannot come to any people unless somebody (or some body of men), wills it, and to will an aggressive war is a crime. No matter if the present war put a final end to war, the gods will not credit us with the good that flows from our act over and above our purpose and will.

All the good that comes from war comes from struggle, self-denial, heroism—and all courses of action that develop these traits are substitutes for war. The farm, the mining camp, engineering, exploration are substitutes. The best war material is recruited from these fields. The man who can guide

the plow-share can wield the sword, the man who can face the grizzly and the lion can face the cannon and the torpedo. War develops no new virtues; it helps rejuvenate the old—obedience, team-work, system, organization and so on are achievements of an industrial age. In history most wrongs are finally righted and the balance is fairly kept, but this is not by the will and purpose of the actors but by the remedial forces of nature and life.

The guilt falls the same upon the greed and lust of power, even if the gods finally reap a harvest that man's iniquities have sown. He maketh the wicked to praise him, but the wicked are to get no credit. Here is where our moral standards diverge from those of the natural universal. Our moral standards apply to us alone; they are special and limited. The gods know them not. The rain falls alike upon the just and unjust. The poet says: "I judge not as the judge judges, but as the sunlight falling around a helpless thing." This is the voice of the natural universal. When we judge as the judge judges, we condemn strife and war and all such uncharity, we execute or imprison criminals, we found asylums and hospitals and other charitable organizations; when we judge as Nature or the poet judges, we say to the fallen one:

Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,
Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the
leaves to rustle for you, do my words refuse
to glisten and rustle for you.

The All brings mercy out of cruelty, love out of hatred, life out of death, but man's orbit is so small that he cannot harmonize these contradictions. The curve of the universal laws does not bring him round till generations have passed. To keep on traveling east till you approach your point of departure from the west you must have the round globe to travel on. An empire would not avail.

VII

Good and evil are strangely mixed in this world and probably in all other worlds. What is evil to one creature is often good to another. It is an evil to the vireo or to the warbler when the cowbird lays its egg in the nest of one of these birds, but it is a good to the cowbird. It relieves her of all maternal cares and it provides her young with a devoted nurse and step-mother, but the young warblers or vireos are likely to perish. All parasites live at the expense of some other form of life, and are to that extent evils to these forms. But Nature is just as much interested in one form as in the other; an ill wind to one blows good to another, and thus the balance is kept.

A world without evil would be an impossible world—as impossible as mechanical motion without friction or as sunlight without shadow. The two worlds, the organic and the inorganic, constantly interact. The former draws all its elements and its power from the latter, which is passive to it, and goes its way in the inexorable round of physical laws, irrespective of it. Viewed as a whole, the evils of life inhere in its elements and conditions. Air, water, fire, soil, give us our strength and our growth, they also destroy us if we fail to keep up our right relations to them. We cannot walk or lift a hand with-

out gravity, and yet, give gravity a chance—and it crushes us, the floods drown us, fire consumes us! Could we have life on any other terms, could God himself annul these conditions?

Hunger is or may become an evil destroying life, but does it not imply the opposite condition of good—food, an appetite, power of assimilation in the organism? Disease is an evil to the living body it attacks, but it does not attack a dead body and it often educates the body to resist disease. It is a war which may leave the victor more capable than he was before.

Robert Ingersoll conceived of an improvement in creation—"make health contagious instead of disease." But this is to trifle with words. In a certain sense health is contagious. But physical health, like peace of mind, is a condition, and must come from harmony within, while a contagious disease is conveyed by a living micro-organism, and is truly catching, and to change or reverse all this would be to destroy the conditions of life itself. To postulate a world in which two and two would make five, or in which a straight line is not the shortest distance between two points, is to take the road to the insane asylum. Evil is positive only in the sense that shadow or darkness is positive, or that cold is positive. It is a greater or lesser degree of negation.

In society and in the state we seek to curb or to correct or to eliminate Nature's errors, and in doing so often fall into other errors and cross purposes. Yet to fight what we call evil, and promote what we call good, is the supreme duty of all men. Physical evil the doctors and natural philosophers warn us against; moral evil, which is a much more intangible thing, our ethical teachers point out to us; mental evil, ignorance, superstition, false judgment and so on, the schools and colleges help us to avoid; religious evil, economic evil, political evil, all have their safeguards and guides.

Why could not a world have been made in which there was no evil? In asking such a question we

misapprehend the nature of the world; we are thinking of something made and a maker external to it, we are trying the universe by the standards of our human experience. The world was not made, man was not created in any sense paralleled by our human experience with tangible bodies. The world and all there is in it is the result of evolution or an endless process of creation, an everlasting becoming, in which the nature of things beyond which we can take no step plays the principal part. A world on any other terms would not be the world to which we are adjusted, and out of whose conflicting forces our lives came.

There will be times when the light will blind the eye, other times when the darkness will heal and restore it; when the heat will burn the hand, when the food will poison the stomach, when the friend will weary you, when home is a prison, when books are a bore. Our relation to things make them good or bad, our momentary and accidental relations may make the good things bad, but our permanent natural relations make the good good, the bad bad.

In a world without the gravity which so often crushes us, we could not walk or lift the hand; without the friction which so often impedes us, our train and vehicles would not move; without the water that could so easily drown us, the currents of our bodies would dry up; without the germs that so often make war upon us, we should soon cease to be. Both friendly and hostile are the powers that surround us—or, rather, is the power that surrounds us, for it is one and not two—friendly when we are in the relations to it demanded and provided for by our constitution, and unfriendly when we are in false relations to it. To know this true relation from the false is a part of the discipline of life.

I know this is not the end of the story; there are more questions to be asked. We want a solution of the last solution, but this can never come. Final questions return forever to themselves; they baffle us, constituted as our minds are; they are circles and not lines.

John Burroughs

WAKE

The stage eternal each day set for us
Lures me through casement eyes to view the sun
As he with golden fingers, out of night,
Uplifts the earth's dark curtains, one by one.
From scenes that lie before me still and strange
He strikes the gloom, and scatters it o'er top
Of hills in golden fume. From his low range
The slow light filters through the trees and
streams

And all the porticoes of morning throng
With birds that wait to carol forth their song.
These many tribéd creatures, downy soft,

Trill forth unfathomed sweetness from each throat,
From some the epic, some the joy of life
Wells forth in pensive or in chirping note,
The mountains in their movements ever change
As their new heads and breasts come into view,
And their gaunt monster knees and feet show
through.

Between cloud-shrines the high priest mounts his
path

And sees the heart of man still seek to fit
His finite yearning to the infinite!

Martha B. Mosher